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# Gendered trends in young people's participation in active lifestyles: The need for a gender-neutral narrative

Sarah Nicola Metcalfe

Durham University, Durham, UK

Iain Lindsey

Durham University, Durham, UK

## Abstract

Gendered differences in participation in active lifestyles (encompassing sport, physical activity, and physical education) are well established, with young men typically participating in more activities than young women. This paper uses a theoretical approach inspired by Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and capital to explore the 'how' and 'why' of these differences. Drawing on mixed-methods data obtained from questionnaires (n = 332) and semi-structured interviews with 33 young men and 37 young women aged 15–16, we present two gendered trends which explain gendered differences in active lifestyle participation. Firstly, in this research, young men participated in more activities than young women, viewing their participation as integral to their identity, their sense of self. Young women, in contrast, viewed sport as an 'optional' extra, something they could do, if they wished. Secondly, in relation to the differences in the type of activities participated in, young men were more likely to participate in traditional team sports, whereas young women chose to engage in gym/fitness activities to promote appearance and feminine attractiveness. We argue that the gendered norms which dictate 'appropriate' gendered active identities are damaging to both young men and women who may wish to deviate from these norms. Social capital is allocated to gendered bodies in accordance with these norms, influencing how young people are viewed in their social hierarchies. A gender-neutral narrative which destabilises gendered sporting norms whilst simultaneously celebrating diversity is needed to promote a safe and inclusive environment where all young men and women can engage in sufficient physical activity.

Corresponding author:

Sarah Nicola Metcalfe, Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University, 42 Old Elvet,

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## Introduction

Young people should engage in regular physical activity (PA) (Public Health England, 2011; Sport England, 2018), yet, for many, physical education (PE) and school sport remain the sole opportunities for this participation (Rich and Perhamus, 2010). In this paper, we consider young people's perspectives of the gendered nature of participation in active lifestyles (through their experiences of sport, PE, or PA), and reflect on how differences in PA participation have consequences for PE and school sport<sup>1</sup>.

More young men participate in sport or PA than young women; however, there is concern that young people in general are insufficiently active (Sport England, 2018; Townsend et al., 2015). School PE, as a compulsory space for being active, is often identified as a site for tackling these differences in PA levels, and has been exposed to numerous initiatives (Public Health England, 2015). However, the historical development of PE often perpetuates differences between male and female PE curricula, paving the way for gendered differences in participation (Kirk, 2002; Scraton, 1992). It is crucial to understand the context for these gendered differences if the gendered participation gap is to be closed. Therefore, this paper explores young people's gendered experiences of active lifestyles, providing evidence of current trends as a starting point for discussing how best to tackle gender issues within the field of PE and school sport. As Scraton (2018: 6) argues, PE can create 'unsafe' spaces. In this paper, we argue that the gendered trends in participation and beliefs about 'appropriately' gendered sports and PAs can contribute to these 'unsafe' spaces across the broader field of active lifestyles, thereby reducing opportunities for young people to challenge the socially constructed norms of expected behaviour and develop positive experiences for future active engagement.

The purpose of this paper is to explore two gendered trends (identity/ability and sport/gym) that emerged from a mixed-methods case study of three schools. We highlight the danger of gendered norms reproducing dominant and stereotypical expectations of gendered bodies for young people through the gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Chambers, 2005; McNay, 2004). We have chosen to use a Bourdieu-inspired perspective that emphasises the significance of capital in rewarding dominant (gendered) behaviours (Bourdieu, 1984; Hunter, 2004). Gau (2015) highlights how Bourdieu's concepts are applicable to the study of the body. Consequently, the body's performativity when engaging in active lifestyles, coupled with the development of the body hexis of the habitus through relationships with others, signifies the importance of peers for young people's gendered development within the concept of the habitus. Thus, we draw on notions of habitus, field and capital, and the following section outlines how we utilise

these concepts in relation to the gendered field of active lifestyles. For young people, the task remains to dismantle taken-for-granted gendered norms and celebrate diversity through a gender-neutral narrative so that opportunities to be active can become an inclusive and 'safe' environment for all.

## Theoretical framework

Central to how we conceptualise gender is the notion of habitus, which is underpinned by capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990, 2001). Whilst a full explanation of Bourdieu's concepts is not possible within the confines of this paper, Metcalfe (2018) provides a more detailed theoretical summary of how the habitus interacts with gender, capital and field for exploring gendered identities in young people.

The habitus, as a 'general, transposable disposition' (Bourdieu, 1984: 166) operates at both non-conscious and conscious levels to influence thoughts, beliefs and behaviours (Wacquant, 1989). Resultantly, social norms and beliefs are reproduced through the habitus, leading to these taken-for-granted norms becoming normalised and unchallenged. Formative experiences of gendered and segregated PE curricula (Scruton, 1992) reinforce difference and influence how young men and women relate to the subject and view their own physical capabilities. Brown and Aldous (2015) draw upon Bourdieu's notion of habitus to analyse teacher perceptions and practices within PE, concluding that the practical knowledge which pervades PE dictates the norms and behaviours that are rewarded. They outline that these taken-for-granted norms about PE consequently influence the experiences that young people have during their school PE lessons. We draw on these ideas to suggest that the reproduction of the specific gendered habitus within the broader field of active lifestyles is potentially damaging for young people who may wish to challenge these taken-for-granted norms. For instance, the increasing problematisation of girls' behaviour and performance in PE represents a dominant belief which permeates current PE discourse (Azzarito and Solomon, 2005; Fagrell et al., 2012), with a lasting effect on future participation likely through the socialisation process underpinning one's habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Through the habitus, these messages may become doxic, and create a self-fulfilling prophecy for young people who fear the social consequences of not conforming to dominant gendered expectations.

Bourdieu identified four types of capital – economic, social, symbolic and cultural (Lisak et al., 2015) – and its accumulation signifies one's position within the social field (Bourdieu, 1984, 2001). Symbolic capital has 'a cognitive base, which rests on cognition and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1998: 85), and thus is applicable to the study of gendered identities through sport in this paper. Specifically, Bourdieu viewed gender as a secondary principle for structuring space – it is not included as a specific feature of his theory of practice. However, the embodied nature of both capital and gender indicates how gendered identities can be socially rewarded through symbolic capital (Laberge, 1995). Value is assigned to gendered bodies, practices and identities; thus, dominant

ways of being are reinforced through the taken-for-granted assumptions of the habitus within the field of active lifestyles. For instance, Shilling (1991) explored how physical capital developed through sporting or leisure activities can be transformed into symbolic capital and valued accordingly. Physical capital is a powerful social tool for young men, whose participation and excellence in sport and PA is assumed as ‘natural’ in comparison to how sport is socially constructed for young women (Hargreaves, 1994). Moreover, Bridges (2009) devised the concept of gender capital as a combination of hegemonic masculinity and cultural capital, where individuals whose bodies more closely approximate socially constructed ideals of masculinity (for males) and femininity (for females) are rewarded. The allocation of capital in relation to sport and active lifestyles offers a suggestion as to how differences in PA participation levels may be reproduced: young men are often rewarded for matching dominant notions of ability (Croston and Hills, 2017; Wright and Burrows, 2006), which simultaneously undermines the ‘sporty’ female (Metcalf, 2018). Paechter and Clark (2007) highlight the temporary value of a tomboy identity for young women, emphasising that as young people transition through adolescence and into adulthood, gendered relationships with sport can change. The othering of the ‘sporty’ (or tomboy) female indicates a lack of available capital for young women, which may link to the fewer numbers of young women engaging in regular PA (Sport England, 2018). As we will argue, the development of gendered trends in how young people engage in PE and school sport is strongly associated with the accumulation of social capital which manifests in young people’s hierarchies of popularity. Thus, through a Bourdieu-inspired framework, a narrative which celebrates the abilities of both young men and women within active contexts may help destabilise the current trend and promote a more gender-neutral and inclusive environment for PE and school sport.

Social space is multidimensional and consists of fields that are characterised by a struggle for legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1985), yet different fields are interlinked (Dagkas and Quarmby, 2015). Hunter (2004) outlined PE as a field characterised by a structured system of social relations between PE teachers, teacher educators, curriculum writers, students and school administrators. The fields of PE and sport have similarities – the types of practice involved in each field and the relationships between participants (e.g. student–teacher/player–coach). Yet the compulsory nature of the field of PE may create a different dynamic to how the field is experienced for young people compared to ‘voluntary’ engagement in sport. In this paper, we argue that for young people, their experiences in active lifestyles incorporate both sport and PE, and thus, can be combined into an overarching field. Despite Brown’s (2006: 171) argument that the specific field of sport uses ‘symbolic opposition as a core interpretative framework that imposes certain differentiated regimes of practice on the body’, this is also true of PE through different curricula, teachers and activities for young men and women (Scruton, 1992). For young people, capital can be transferred and reconfigured to have meaning across different fields, and broader notions of gender influence how young people understand their active lifestyles. To this extent, ‘sporty’ young men meet the gendered expectations of ‘success’, and can accrue capital (Bramham, 2003; Fagrell et al., 2012; Horne et al.,

2011; lisahunter et al., 2015; Metcalfe, 2018), which is realised in wider social interactions and hierarchies (Francis et al., 2010). As we will discuss, the trends identified in young people's participation in active lifestyles do not exist in isolation from other areas of their lives; thus the complexity of PA participation, gender and capital must not be underestimated (Wright and Macdonald, 2010). As mentioned above, the often non-conscious gendered habitus differs for young men and women in relation to how being active is viewed within their gendered identity (Metcalfe, 2018).

Bourdieu's theoretical tools enable this paper to explore the 'how' and 'why' of gendered differences in participation in sport and PA. We present this theoretical underpinning to add depth and analysis to the 'why' – previous research has consistently demonstrated a gender difference in young people's participation rates (the 'how': e.g. Aaron et al., 2002; Armstrong et al., 1990; Biddle et al., 2004); however, we propose that using Bourdieu's sociological tools can shed light on the theoretical framing of this issue to explore 'why' these differences may occur in practice. The development of the two gendered trends in this paper therefore provides evidence as to 'why' there are differences in participation between young men and women. Underpinning the use of Bourdieu's theoretical notions in relation to PE experiences, we look to Gorely et al. (2003) who utilise the concept of habitus to discuss the merits and challenges to achieving a gender-relevant PE. Their key conclusions are that 'interventions that seek to target "girls" or "boys" as homogeneous categories are bound to fail' (Gorely et al., 2003: 442), and that the underpinning physical culture must also be challenged if PE is to be reconfigured to promote active lifestyles for young people. Previous PE interventions are highlighted in their research as unsuccessful due to over- looking the complexities of the issues of gender and the life-course development of the habitus. Gorely et al. (2003) use the notion of gender-relevant PE which considers how gender, class, race, ethnicity and (dis)ability are intertwined in notions of 'success'. Whilst drawing heavily on their research, our paper reconfigures 'gender-relevant' as 'gender-neutral' to reflect the need to overtly challenge the binary and oppositional constructions of gender which underpin how young people understand appropriate behaviours and identities within their gendered habitus. Under our conceptualisation of gender-neutrality, we propose that gender-diversity in choice, uptake and performance should be celebrated. Only through this can the assumed naturalness of (male) 'sporty' identities based on an ideology of difference be challenged, and opportunities can be developed for both young men and women to enjoy, and positively thrive in, active environments.

## Methods

This paper draws on data collected within a broader study which focused on the complexities of gender and identities for young people across different social fields: schooling; sport; media; and physical culture. The data used within this paper were collected about young people's broad experiences of active lifestyles (incorporating school-based PE alongside extra-curricular participation in sport or PA). A mixed-

methods design was used to explore different perspectives of young people's gendered experiences. This choice of design allowed for the complexities of gendered identities across different fields to be sympathetically acknowledged throughout the research process. Fields consist of 'interconnected moments' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 104), and thus, a mixed-method design, incorporating questionnaires and semi-structured inter-views is best placed to explore these interconnected experiences.

The research was conducted in three demographically different schools in North East England. These schools were selected for their differences, using free school meal data as a proxy for socioeconomic status (David et al., 2001): an 11–16 mixed comprehensive located in a deprived area; a comprehensive (11–18) with a more affluent and middle-class catchment area and an educational ethos promoting academic attainment; and a 13–18 independent mixed (fee-paying) day and boarding school with a steep history as a boys-only school with a strong focus on traditional team sports (rugby union). Within each school, all Year 11 students (aged 15–16, n 1/4 332, 195 male/137 female) completed a questionnaire; follow-up interviews were conducted with 70 young people (33 young men, 37 young women). Students in Year 11 (aged 15–16) were chosen because this academic year represents the last year of compulsory school-based education (and PE lessons) in the UK, and is a significant period of transition when sport and PA participation may change.

The questionnaire covered topics relating to the young person's self-identified sex, participation in sport/PA, self-rated perceptions of ability (on a scale of 1–10), enjoyment of PE and open-ended questions relating to perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Many young people identified a willingness to be interviewed (n 1/4 117); however, 33 young men and 37 young women were selected based on questionnaire responses to produce a varied sample in relation to their reported levels of sport/PA and their perceptions of masculinity/femininity (Mason, 2006). The research took place in a predominantly White area, and those interviewed mirrored this (White n 1/4 67, Black n 1/4 1, Asian n 1/4 2). Within this paper, the views of young people are presented in relation to their gendered trends and behaviours within the context of PE and school sport. These trends were largely consistent across the three schools; however, where appropriate, a discussion of (classed) school differences will be included.

Questionnaire responses were initially sifted to select participants for interview. A more detailed analysis of questionnaire results was completed following the interviews to explore how young men and women differed on participation measures. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the differences in participation levels between young men and women. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare: number of hours of sport/PA; and self-rated ability at PE and school sport between young men and women. Questionnaire responses which outlined young people's participation in sport/PA were binary coded on three levels – whether the young person participates in: (a) a traditionally gender-non-appropriate sport (yes/no); (b) traditionally identified competitive team sports

(e.g. rugby, football, and netball; yes/no); or (c) gym/fitness activities (yes/no). These binary classifications were used in a chi-squared test of independence to draw a comparison between trends and behaviours of young men and women. The classification of sports as gender appropriate/non- appropriate/neutral was based on a combination of existing academic literature (Matteo, 1986; Riemer and Visio, 2003) and the dominant views of young people identified during interviews (see Table 1). Riemer and Visio (2003), using Metheny's classification system, outline that sports traditionally viewed as female-appropriate are those that highlight the aesthetic appearance of the body and do not involve physical contact or force. Dominant notions of what constitutes gender-appropriate/non-appropriate can vary depending on cultural and geographical location (e.g. football/soccer) and can vary over time to reflect wider societal norms or beliefs, thus the classification outlined below is sensitive to the specific experiences of the young people in this study. The quantitative data are used in this paper to supplement the semi-structured interview data, and provide support for the two trends in young people's gendered PA participation.

Table 1: Classification of gender-appropriate sports used in analysis

Male gender-appropriate	Female gender-appropriate	Gender-neutral
Boxing	Dance	Athletics
Cricket	Gymnastics	Golf
Football	Hockey (field)	Rowing/Canoeing
Rugby (Union/League)	Netball	Cycling
Weightlifting	Horse Riding*	Gym/Fitness Activities
Shooting*		Running/Jogging
Motorsport		Badminton
Extreme Sports		Walking
(BMX/Skateboarding)*		Squash/Table Tennis
Basketball*		Tennis
Rock Climbing		Swimming
N.B. Those marked with * have been classified in relation to current perceptions outlined during interviews with young people.		

Semi-structured interviews addressed perceptions of gender, contradictions and complexities in how gender is presented when being active, and experiences of PE. Young people were offered the possibility to be interviewed individually or with a friend (32 interviews were conducted with individuals; 19 with a friend). Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes (mean 46). All names in this paper are pseudonyms allocated randomly during transcription. Examples of questions asked during the interviews include: 'Have you felt any pressure to play certain types of sport over others?'; 'Are some sports more suited to males or females? Why do you think this is?'; 'How does gender link to sport?'; 'What do you think of PE?', etc. When discussing gendered stereotypes, photograph prompts were used depicting sporting bodies participating in both traditionally gender-appropriate and non- gender-appropriate sports (selection of



photographs informed by Gorely et al.'s (2003) methods). These prompts were used to support young people in talking about gendered bodies, masculinity and femininity (in an active context) and draw connections between sports, gender and the structure of PE.

A thematic analysis of interview transcripts utilised both inductive and deductive coding to draw connections between data and theory (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Following transcription, all interviews were read, re-read and key quotations were extracted and linked (where appropriate) to theoretical ideas to produce distinct themes. For instance, the internalisation of gender norms that influence 'appropriate' sports for young men and women emerged as important for how young people relate to sport. This emerged from the data, but equally, was simultaneously linked to the habitus as a theoretical frame to explain this behaviour. The two primary themes of identity/ability and sport/gym exemplify the dominant trends in young people's participation. In a previous paper drawing on these young people's experiences and data to explore how a gendered habitus is constructed (Metcalf, 2018), the initial theme of identity/ability was briefly explored in the context of the development of a gendered habitus. This paper extends that argument, providing data and supporting evidence as to the prevalence and consequences of this trend and how young people might positively learn to engage in PE and school sport through a gender-neutral narrative.

## Findings

A critical context for this paper to explore gendered differences in engagement with an active lifestyle focuses on the consistent evidence of differences in participation rates between young men and women (Sport England, 2018). For this sample of young people, this difference continues: these young men participate in (on average) 6.76 (standard deviation (SD) 1/4 4.4) hours of PA/sport/PE a week, compared to 5.10 (SD 1/4 3.5) hours for young women (statistically significant difference:  $t(330)$  1/4 3.538,  $p$  1/4 < 0.000). This observed difference emphasises the need to promote a more equal environment in which all young people can be encouraged to positively engage in active lifestyles. In the following sub-sections, we present the two trends in participation that young people expressed during their interviews before drawing conclusions relating to how gendered assumptions must be challenged to promote opportunities for all young people within the field of active lifestyles.

### Trend 1: Identity/ability

Historically, sport has been strongly aligned with maleness and masculinity (Bramham, 2003), succinctly explained by Hargreaves (1994: 146): 'For huge numbers of men the image and experience of the body are intimately linked to sporting experiences: for the majority of women, the image and experience of the body have very little or nothing to do with sports'. Thus, the integration of sport into the male habitus is evidenced by young men expressing the key role of sport in their own self-identity. For instance, Gary, when

asked whether he considered himself 'sporty', responded: 'Yes...[being 'sporty'] is important to define who I am because it helps me express myself sometimes, like who I am, what I can do. Sport helps in that sense.' Through considering sport an identity, a part of the self, these young men are demonstrating a belief in the benefit of sport for their own gendered identity construction. For many young men, when discussing their active lifestyles (incorporating sport, PE, PA, etc.), 'sport' was the most commonly used term – indicating the social value of sport as part of how young men construct their sense of self.

Critically for how sport appears integral to the construction of male identities in this paper, Schmader and Block (2015) identify that one's gendered identity can become associated with certain traits which inform one's self-definition. For these young men, reproducing the dominant stereotype of sporting prowess (Bramham, 2003; Connell, 2007) functions as a source of collective pride and is thus normalised. During one interview, Luke retrieved an American football from his school bag and began throwing it to himself. This public display of sporting ability can be interpreted as an extension of the self the football demonstrated his proximity to socially constructed norms regarding sport and masculinity. Young men's proximity to sporting norms constructed as 'natural' contrasts with the lack of engagement and sporty identity which was typical of the young women in this paper. The dichotomy is reinforced by Jonny's reflection: 'I couldn't picture myself as a girl . . . I don't mean it horribly, I prefer [being male] for the fact that I'm into my sports like football, and I couldn't picture myself not playing them [as a girl]'. Thus, sport, for these young men, is viewed as synonymous with the successful representation of masculinity. The expectation which equates sport with a successful male identity thus becomes assumed as taken-for-granted within the male habitus. Our quantitative data demonstrating higher levels of participation in active lifestyles for young men than young women illustrate how these taken-for-granted norms are reified through practice.

In contrast to the perceived importance of sport to the 'successful' male identity, young women spoke of sport as an optional 'extra'. In this way, sport was viewed as something they could do, should they wish. This links to the allocation of social capital to culturally valued representations of gender (Bridges, 2009; Horne et al., 2011; Shilling, 1991). The distancing of young women from the 'sporty' (and perceived male) identity is demonstrated by Millie: 'I'm not one of those people who revolves their life around sport.' This chimes with the findings of the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (2012: 15) report that identified seven 'types' of girl, of which two were idolised by young women: 'popular' and/or 'girly girls'; these desirable identities are usually characterised by a distancing from sport, and as our interviews illustrate, for many young women, sport is not a valued activity or identity:

"I used to be very sporty, I used to see it as very important, I used to do netball in primary school and also outside of school, but by the time I've got to doing my

GCSEs it's become irrelevant . . . it's 'cause I think girls don't value it [sport] as much, I definitely think most people, girls in our year, don't value PE and sport that much, so we've lost that whole idea of effort towards it . . . we just see PE as being really irrelevant, like whatever [activity] it is, we're really not bothered. I think it's more important for boys." (Sophie)

Sophie illustrates the construction of difference which permeates young people's perceptions of their engagement in PE and school sport. By comparing what girls and boys value, Sophie reinforces a stereotype and gendered trend which limits perceived opportunities for others to challenge these expectations. Furthermore, this quote aligns with Paechter and Clark's (2007) research on tomboys: reflecting on a previous identity where Sophie 'used to be very sporty', the temporal nature of the 'sporty' female identity is emphasised and potentially predicates young women's lower participation rates as they progress through adolescence. Young women in the interviews distanced themselves from the tomboy and 'sporty' identity, which is further evidenced by Claire, 'everyone goes through the tomboy phase, don't they? Mine was when I was ten and used to wear shorts all the time!'. Thus, using sport as an ability (rather than an identity) carries greater social significance through the allocation of social capital from non-active identities.

Extending the notion of sport as an integrated part of the male identity is the way in which young people associate sport with their own perceptions of ability. Whilst this subsection refers to young women viewing sport as an ability, this is optional and does not reflect their own perceived abilities at sport. For instance, Chantel emphasises this optional engagement with PE and school sport: 'I can play sports, but I'm not "sporty", but I can [play]'. She refers to her experiences of joining her current school as important in teaching her 'how' to play different sports, but views participation in an active lifestyle as ultimately a personal choice, rather than being integral to a sense of self within her gendered identity (as was the case for the young men interviewed). Using questionnaire data, young men self-rated their ability statistically higher than young women (6.9 out of 10 compared to 6.3, statistically significant  $p = 0.009$ , confidence interval 0.144–1.020). A perceived lower ability in PE and school sport has negative consequences for how young women consider being 'sporty' and their subsequent participation: 'I'm not really sure what I'm good at . . . when I think about it, I put myself down, so I don't do anything' (Carly). Women are often perceived as less physically able compared to men (Hay and Macdonald, 2010), and our interview data suggest that this dominant perception has become realised in how young people consider their gendered (active) identity, and their subsequent behaviours. The sub-fields of PE and sport are both characterised by an assumed hierarchy of (gendered) abilities and the naturalness of the male sporting body. The wider societal appreciation of the 'natural' male sporting body often remains unchallenged (Hargreaves, 1994), indicating how the aforementioned gendered trends in participation are likely to continue. Challenging these assumptions and taken-for-granted norms becomes an important method to foster a safe and inclusive environment for all where both young men and women can engage in active lifestyles.

Through the gendered habitus, norms and gendered expectations are often reproduced (Bourdieu, 2001; Chambers, 2005; lisahunter et al., 2015). The identity/ability trend is developed within young people's habitus through previous experiences in PE and school sport, as a form of socialisation. This reproduction is echoed by young people's analysis of the gendered differences in participation in their active lifestyles: 'everyone says boys are more sporty than girls . . . it's probably because everyone said it when we were younger and it's carried on' (Leah); and, 'boys like sport, girls like girly things. Whether that's because that's what they genuinely like, or how they've been brought up, I don't know, but it's the case' (Chloe). Positioning sport as male demonstrates that through the dichotomy of identity/ability, sex-based differences, when assumed to be 'natural' in their application to gender and sporting participation, have become taken-for-granted within the gendered habitus. Whilst our data cannot assume a causal relationship between these gendered trends as taken-for-granted beliefs and PA rates, our argument shows that these norms influence how young people view being active, and suggest that underpinning stereotypes may have an important role to play in participation levels.

## Trend 2: Sport/gym

In our interviews, differences existed in the types of activity in which young men and women chose to participate: young men typically valued competitive team sports in contrast to gym/fitness activities for young women. The striking difference between these two positions as dominant behavioural norms illustrates how physical practices can become taken-for-granted, so that young people come to 'know' the type of activities which are expected of them in relation to their gendered identity. Integral to this gendered trend is the relationship between activities and the gendered body, reflecting dominant social perceptions about attractive gendered bodies and the instrumentality of the body for a gendered purpose. Thus, the field of active lifestyles cannot be separated from broader cultural fields where gendered bodies are presented (e.g. media/fashion/popular culture). In this sub-section, we argue that the different behaviours and dispositions of young men and women in relation to their active lifestyles have become normalised within the gendered habitus. The oppositional symbolic construction of activities as suited to males or females underpins the embodied physical practices that differ between young men and women (Brown, 2006).

Young men in this study were more likely to participate in traditional competitive team sports (54.9%) than young women (27.7%) (chi-squared test of independence:  $\chi^2(1) = 28.084$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). In contrast, young women were more likely to participate in gym/fitness activities (56.2%) than young men (42.1%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.459$ ,  $p = 0.011$ ). These findings mirror previous evidence of gendered trends in participation (e.g. Biddle et al., 2004; Public Health England, 2011; Sport England, 2018). For young men, competitive team sports were viewed as a vehicle to demonstrate distinction and masculinity:

. . . men's sport is based on . . . being able to show you're competitive and better than other people, but with feminine sports like dance or ballet, there's no scoring system so it's not really what men would want to do, because it's not about beating each other. (Danny)

Traditionally, sport has served a purpose to demonstrate masculine prowess and superiority (Connell, 2007), and this quotation further grounds this notion in how young men relate to their active choices. Hauge and Haavind (2011) outline that many young men are aware of how bodies can appear masculine and the different activities which are associated with this representation: football (soccer) is strongly linked to the display of masculinity. Through team sports such as football, the young men in our sample outlined how a valued social identity is formed through interactions with others: 'football, is the all-round game, you need skill, talent, be healthy, but it's also a team game so you're no one without the other ten people' (Owen). Therefore, our data support previous research documenting that the paradigmatic form of displaying hegemonic masculinity occurs through these competitive team activities (Gerdin, 2016).

The prioritisation of team sports by the young men interviewed created an opposition between those who engage with team sports and those who participate in gym/fitness activities, referred to as 'gym freaks'; for instance, 'people who are crazy about their bodies are gym freaks . . . I'm not a gym freak at all' (Stevie). The importance of the male body in sport being functional rather than aesthetic is emphasised by Danny:

I'm more about how actually good at something I can be, like actually being able to beat people. I could be, if I could win the CrossFit Games and be skinny and ugly, but still actually be the best, I'd prefer that to being big and strong with a perfect physique, but actually useless at sport.

Whilst Danny refers to CrossFit, a competitive sport which incorporates both individual and team elements, it is not usually thought of as a traditional team game. Nevertheless, this sentiment that men's bodies should be functional, rather than aesthetic, reinforces the concept that for young men, sporting prowess and competition are rewarded through associated symbolic capital and an elevated social status. Thus, the relationship between the type of activity and the body reflects the different purposes of being physically active: if young men are engaging in sport for competition, prowess and to demonstrate masculinity (Connell, 2007; Gerdin, 2016), their understanding of the functionality of their body contrasts to the aesthetic sculpting of the body emphasised within gym/fitness cultures (Bordo, 2003; Hauge, 2009; Walseth et al., 2017). Engagement with sport in relation to the impact on one's body is closely linked to wider notions of gender, demonstrating the significance of understanding these complexities to challenge how active identities are constructed for young people. Importantly, the influence of gender norms which dictate acceptable behaviours within one's habitus is not only problematic for young women: pressures to conform to dominant embodied representations are potentially damaging for both young men and women who do not (or do not wish to)

match their gendered expectations.

In contrast to young men's engagement with competitive team sports, young women were more likely to favour gym/fitness activities. This is clearly articulated by Sam: 'I'm very much on the fitness side, rather than the sport side'. Young men and women view the function of their bodies in contrasting ways: the athletically functional male body differs to the use of gym/fitness activities to (re)create an attractive female body that conforms to a heterosexual gaze (Bordo, 2003; Walseth et al., 2017). Across the interviews, young women were aware of requirements for their body to be aesthetically pleasing, and had internalised the view that the female body requires work to correct its imperfections (Bordo, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984):

Kiera: [Girls go to the gym] for their appearance, definitely. They want to be attractive . . .

Millie: It's not to keep themselves fit and healthy, it's so they can get a big bum and a toned stomach. Lots of girls go on about how they need to lose weight and go to the gym, but they don't actually need to [lose weight].

Kiera: [Going to the gym] It's for attention, definitely.

This conversation highlights how the practice of 'going to the gym' is illustrative of an outward demonstration of a 'healthy' body, rather than using the gym to engage in health-enhancing levels of PA. Wright and Burrows (2006: 278) argue that 'the appearance of the body is assumed to be an indicator of not only good health, but the work done on the body, and the dispositions to managing the self that this is taken to imply'. Interview data reaffirm the role of gym/fitness for young women in creating the illusion of improving the appearance of their bodies, aligning their image with dominant ideals of feminine attractiveness. 'Going to the gym' implies the individual has internalised societal gender norms within their habitus, because gyms are believed to be a space where body improvements 'happen'. Rather than emphasising the health benefits of PA, for many of these young women, the focus of participation is more towards a symbolic appearance of 'health' that is conceptualised as a slim and attractive feminine body:

You have girls who wear sixty-five pound leggings, whereas I have ten pound leggings on. They do the same job, but they look better in them . . . [you feel like] you have to look really good when you're just going for a jog. When you go to the gym, you have to look super fit, a lot of girls think they need to go and look good, they don't want to sweat, don't want to be red, they want to look good. Going to the gym is all about what it looks like to other people, status. There are girls who go to the gym and just pretend to be fit. It's become more of a hang-out spot. (Kate)

By 'pretending' to be fit, a pseudo-active identity is developed, because the space of the

gym is symbolic of a positive relationship with one's body. Consequently, the gym represents a space to emphasise the successful negotiation of their gendered identity. Young women's engagement with gym/fitness activities for appearance reasons is potentially problematic in relation to participation data. Current guidelines specify that young people should participate in 60 minutes of PA each day (seven hours/week) (Sport England, 2018). In our current data, more young men identified participating in seven hours of activity per week (40.5%) compared to young women (26.3%) (statistically significant:  $\chi^2(1) = 7.202$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). However, this sub-section has highlighted that young women often 'go to the gym' as a 'hang-out spot', without engaging in activity. Therefore, within our data, young women's self-reported indicators of activity levels may overestimate actual activity, thus differences for young men and women meeting activity recommendations, and achieving subsequent health benefits, are likely to be greater.

Gym/fitness activities provide an opportunity for young women to visibly demonstrate a positive relationship with their body. The body's appearance is thus a vehicle through which symbolic capital is allocated. The possession of a gym membership was used as a tokenistic indicator of symbolic capital: for both young men and women attending the two state schools, gym memberships were reified as a 'thing', a form of capital, and an indication of the associated positive relationship with one's body. Many interviewees felt it important to disclose having a membership: '...I've got a gym membership and I go to the gym sometimes' (Anna); and, 'I have a gym membership, not that I go very often' (Maisie). The hypocrisy and contradiction in the reification of gym memberships as a method of demonstrating social capital was stated by Millie: '...it's like "I have a gym membership, I go to the gym, look at me", but they don't actually do anything'. For these young women, having a gym membership symbolically aligns their gendered body closer to the idealised feminine identity. Within the field of active lifestyles that these young people experience, the embodiment of the idealised feminine identity is rewarded through symbolic capital. McNay (2004: 186) suggests that, 'to "pass" as middle class, working-class women make strong investments in bodies . . . [and] leisure pursuits'; thus, in our sample, gym memberships functioned as a way for young women from the two state schools to 'pass' as having a more middle-class relationship with their body. No young women at the fee-paying school shared their possession of a gym membership, implying that they feel no need to emphasise their commitment to middle-class ideals around the fit, healthy and attractive body; instead, their habitus and bodily hexis (Bourdieu, 1984) embodies this 'naturally'.

In this sub-section, we have presented evidence documenting the differential behaviours of young people in relation to the type of activity. Whilst we have shown a gendered trend for young men to choose competitive team sports, and young women gym/fitness activities, our interview data also suggest that there is more rigidity in available active options for young men to accrue capital. Bourdieu (1984: 173) highlights that within one's habitus, there is a 'forced choice', because one's previous history, experience and socialisation predisposes individuals to have a range of possibilities available which are

specific to their own gendered and classed trajectories. The results of a chi-squared test of independence indicates that young women were more likely to participate in a non-gender-appropriate sport (21.9%) than young men (8.7%) (statistically significant;  $\chi^2(1) = 11.502$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Reflecting on this possible rigidity of norms for young men, interview data show that campaigns and interventions have been successful in raising awareness of sport for young women, but this simultaneously stabilises 'appropriate' behaviours for young men:

... there are campaigns ... if you go down the PE corridor, there's 'This Girl Can' posters up on the wall. So, girls doing rugby is seen as very positive, almost better than doing a girly sport because that's maybe bringing down some sort of stereotype...the people who love football are lads and that stereotype influences them to enjoy it more and keep doing it. So, it feels like more of an available option to the lads because of that. (Max)

I think guys are more trapped [in their stereotypes] than us. They're trapped, since everyone has been focusing on women and their rights and ways of thinking, the cage has been opened for us, we're free to do what we want. (Ellie)

Whilst we are presenting the gendered trends which differentiate between the behaviours and beliefs of young men and women as potentially damaging to participation in active lifestyles, these quotations highlight that there is some progress in challenging some stereotypes around the construction of sport as a gendered activity. The historical development of the habitus reinforces the male-as-natural characteristic of sport and PA (Hargreaves, 1994); yet, our data have shown that in this sample, more young women (than young men) are participating in sports that challenge traditional notions of gender-appropriate sport. However, this is still not sufficient to narrow the gap in participation rates through making PE and school sport an attractive activity for all young people.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper has outlined trends of identity/ability and sport/gym for how young people from North East England relate to, and engage in, active lifestyles. This paper offers a new reading of how young men and women differently engage with active lifestyles, adding to our understanding to explain why differences in participation levels might occur. Through the theme of sport/gym, we have shown that young men and women view the functionality of their bodies in very different ways. Conforming to socially desirable notions of attractiveness appears more important for young women than engaging in physical exertion. We have provided evidence that young men are more active than young women, and this expectation, coupled with the requirement for young women to be heterosexually attractive, is rewarded through symbolic capital. Thus, our findings are strongly linked to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital in the field of active



lifestyles: a perceived lack of social capital available for young women engaging in any activity past maintaining an attractive feminine appearance, and for young men challenging established gender norms, represents a demotivating factor for challenging the habitus and differing from socially constructed gendered expectations. This paper therefore provides new evidence to explain young people's engagement in active lifestyles: despite showing that young men participate in more sport/PA than young women, the gendered trends which legitimise certain representations of active identities through social capital, are potentially damaging for both young men and women. In particular, for young men, this is manifested in pressure to participate in traditional team sports, and for young women, to avoid competitive sports. Based on these findings, there is a need to emphasise a gender-neutral narrative which overtly challenges entrenched norms and allows young people to explore various (and multiple) active identities.

Throughout this paper, we have taken inspiration from Gorely et al.'s (2003: 443) study that considered the development of gender-relevant PE curricula and argued that physical empowerment is needed to 'destabilize both stereotypical femininities and masculinities', and interrupt the gendered habitus. These statements are important, yet our paper suggests that there has been little progress in the intervening 16 years towards empowerment and the eradication of gender stereotypes that influence how young people experience active lifestyles. It appears that the current dominant narrative for young people within the social field of active lifestyles continues to reproduce an ideology of difference in which the assumed 'natural' characteristics of males and females are reinforced through the habitus. As the two themes in our paper are testament to, broader expectations of gendered bodies and identity performances are interwoven within the field of active lifestyles. The ideologies of difference that underpin the structure and organisation of sport and PE arguably perpetuate the two gendered trends in this paper, thus young people's gendered engagement with active lifestyles may work to 'reproduce the very structures that limit them' (Hunter, 2004: 176). To this extent, the young people in our research might also benefit from the critical social justice education that is considered in Cameron and Humbert's (2019) exploration of girls' experiences in PE.

The prevalence and strength of these two gendered trends across three demographically different schools indicates the problem faced when considering how to approach PE and school sport from a more gender-neutral narrative. These underpinning ideologies of difference operate, often in a non-conscious way, through the habitus to highlight specific practices and identities as more valuable and legitimate than others. To promote a more positive relationship with active lifestyles for young people, these norms must be challenged: Chambers (2005) suggests the use of consciousness-raising strategies. In relation to our paper, these strategies must challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions within one's habitus that pitch appropriate behaviours as either male or female. Furthermore, all stakeholders within the field of active lifestyles must be encouraged to engage with these strategies (e.g. teachers, students, coaches, and parents; Hunter, 2004); until a non-sporty male (in traditional competitive team sports) and a 'sporty' female

(beyond gym/fitness activities) are considered ‘acceptable’ gendered identities that can accrue social capital, the doxic and taken-for-granted nature of the habitus is likely to be reinforced. Such strategies are needed at individual school-level to account for other factors including race, ethnicity and social class which can influence participation. Activist research acknowledges the need to develop strategies to improve the experiences of specific girls in specific contexts in PE (Oliver and Kirk, 2016). An intervention by Slingerland et al. (2014) has demonstrated how single-gender invasion games in PE can foster an increased sense of competence in adolescent girls, potentially contributing to overcoming the perception highlighted in our research that young women have a lower self-rated ability in active lifestyles. This type of intervention poses possibilities for increasing the likelihood that young women might take on an active identity, rather than the optional behaviour as our data suggest. However, Slingerland et al.’s (2014) research primarily made conclusions about the experiences of girls, but the strength and prevalence of the gendered trends outlined in this paper indicates the need for a critical reflection on practices and assumptions to develop a gender-neutral narrative to benefit all young people.

We therefore argue that the findings in this paper highlight the continuing inequalities in experiences (and opportunities) that young people face within the field of active lifestyles. Whilst the young people in this research spoke of their experiences across the different sub-fields of PE, school sport, competitive sport and PA, the key message highlights how the accumulation of symbolic capital dictates which gendered identities are most valued; for our sample, this meant that the sporty male and the aesthetically attractive (but non-‘sporty’) female hold most power for influencing social practice. We call for further inquiries into how school-level policies and practices may perpetuate gendered differences, to scrutinise the structures which underpin how young people’s experiences of active lifestyles are gendered. In particular, policies or initiatives must be mindful of how broader gendered expectations, formed in other fields (e.g. media, technology, and fashion) have a significant impact on young people’s perceptions of role expectations. By focusing on active lifestyles as integrated within the wider nexus of young people’s social world, we might discover new ways to challenge the current discourse and promote enjoyable active lifestyles for all young people.

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## Note

1. There are clear nuances between physical education (PE), sport, and physical activity (PA) in relation to their definition, purpose and characteristics. Whilst we draw upon data collected from young people in a school setting, their responses were not exclusively limited to their experiences of PE; consequently, we did not use these distinctions when speaking about their engagement in active lifestyles. We use the term ‘active lifestyles’ where necessary to indicate young people’s engagement in PE, sport and PA.

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### Author biographies

Sarah Nicola Metcalfe is an Economic and Social Research Council-funded postdoctoral fellow at Durham University.

Iain Lindsey is an associate professor in the Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences at Durham University.